

JKD Conversations with John Little

(Part 1)



Chris Kent

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Introduction



I have had the privilege of knowing John Little since 1996, and consider him a good friend. Personally, I consider him one of the most knowledgeable people on the planet with regard to both Bruce Lee's art and philosophy of Jeet Kune Do, and a trail-blazer in the world of strength training and fitness. When I approached him about putting material together from our telephone conversations and creating a pdf article for people to read, his response was an enthusiastic, "Yes, by all means!"

The following transcripts are excerpts from two telephone interviews I conducted with John between 2009 and 2011. During our marathon conversations (which were usually 2-3 hours in length) we covered numerous topics including the state of the fitness industry today, fitness and exercise, Bruce Lee and the art and philosophy of Jeet Kune Do, and yes, even the world of JKD politics. As you will see, in much of the interviews, instead of using periods to mark such things as the end of sentences, I have chosen to simply put dashes, because our conversations flowed in a very natural and fluid manner, sometimes darting off in a different direction and then returning to a particular subject.

I have one request from you, the reader, and that is that you read the material here within without any pre-conceptions and with an open mind. As Bruce Lee himself said, "Do not start from a conclusion." You may find yourself agreeing with some things and disagreeing with others, and that is perfectly fine. My goal is to simply share material with you that may enhance your personal growth, be it as a martial artist, and/or as a human being.

With that said, I invite you to "Read On!"

Part 1

Chris: You did a number of interviews for various publications in the mid to late 1990's which I personally felt really cleared up a lot of misperceptions with regard to Jeet Kune Do ... that is if people wanted it to be cleared up.

John: I don't know that they do -- That was kind of my naivete at the time -- I thought, "Oh, the water is kind of muddied and I think we can clear it a bit and people can understand it better -- But in so doing, I think, at some level, they were worried that it would diminish their market -- "Everybody doing JKD," well that's non-exclusionary... doesn't mean you have to be right or wrong, it's whatever you want so everybody... It's like the Bible, everybody can find something to support whatever their belief is, whether it's war or peace, with the right passage -- And to them, from a business vantage point, that is far more attractive than just the truth -- You say, "Well wait a minute, you have to understand this." -- And their answer is, "Uh, shoot, well that's gonna exclude people already because it requires work and it might require them to change their approach or thinking on it. And that will diminish the market. So sorry, not interested." --

Chris: I know that you haven't been involved with things to do with Bruce Lee or the JKD world for several years now, but in my personal opinion, I think that you understand the total picture of what JKD is all about better than the vast majority of other people, including many of those who practice the art. Looking at it now and from your background, what do you feel is the biggest misperception or misconception people have today regarding both Bruce Lee, and also JKD?

John: Whew! That's almost something where you'd need sub-categories (laughs) ...

Chris: You've done so much work with regard to Lee; his life and background, his writings, notes, etc. -- I also know that you have had some training in JKD with people like Ted Wong -- But you approach JKD not from the perspective of someone who has practiced it and now teaches it, but as someone who not only has a degree in philosophy, but is also a well-respected fitness researcher and accomplished writer -- What do you feel are the biggest misconceptions people have regarding Bruce Lee?

John: Well, I guess it depends on the people. -- There are those that believe that he was a 'movie martial artist' -- That's certainly one -- There are those who believe that he was a 'paper tiger', and that he used top champions to prove the validity of his theories, if you will, on martial arts, and that's false -- The thing about Bruce Lee is that he was and remains, I think, the best example of what is possible for a human being to achieve if you make your passion your focus, you grab onto it with both hands, and you go into it with an attitude that not everybody's right -- There's your target destination -- Everybody has their own belief of how you get to that end -- But he was a guy who said, "Well I'm gonna." -- He was largely self-trained. I mean, he did it on his own.

And I think the other misconception, and this just opens the doors, is that he was simply a "cross-trainer," that he took from this art, he took from that art -- That's not really true -- That's the popular one, but I think, unfortunately so many people, and so many arts have tried to "attach their wagons" to his star, so as to advance their own, that it's really muddied the waters.

C: How do you answer people when they say that he was cross-training? -- So often many of the people I run into when I'm attending events or teaching seminars say to me things like, "Well we're doing the same thing that Bruce Lee did.... We're borrowing from this art and taking from that art and creating a system that has all facets of martial arts."

J: I know -- Bruce Lee... it's funny -- Ironically, that was kind of his mindset when he first came to the States in the late 1950's -- That he wanted to create the "ultimate" gung fu system by taking 'this' from 'that' and 'that' from 'this' -- But he got away from that and he got more into, "How do I develop myself?" -- And he realized certain techniques he recognized were the supposed "best" by legendary tales had no applicability -- So it was grounded in reality, it was grounded in science, it was grounded in his aptitude, or lack thereof -- I mean, there might have been martial art techniques, for instance, that a martial artist such as George St. Pierre might be able to do, that Bruce Lee may not have had the genetic make-up to be able to execute at the same level -- Well as good as it was, he wouldn't just say, "Well, I'm going to try and keep working and keep working until I can do this technique." -- He found a better way to make it work -- And if someone showed him a technique that he felt was useful and efficient, he would incorporate it with certain modifications, until it was a very effective technique for him -- I saw on-line the other night that he learned kicking from Jhoon Rhee and Chuck Norris, and grappling from Gene LaBell -- Sorry, but that to me is horse crap -- He learned kicking by teaching himself how to kick.

And you look at his early stuff in Seattle -- Even then he was practicing, and initially it really bothered him to do a kick to the point... I remember Jesse Glover saying, quite accurately, that he really liked the high kicks -- He thought they were cool and they opened another channel of martial options for him -- But he was so tight in the hip region and everything that he really had difficulty kicking above the waist -- And so much so that he had to point the supporting leg toes in the opposite direction in order to do it without pain -- Well, that's something that endured throughout all of his kicks, even in "Enter the Dragon" when he did a hook kick or something, the toes of the supporting leg were facing in the opposite direction -- But that was because of his body mechanics -- I mean, when you mention Bruce Lee, there are so many, many misconceptions that there's not one that overwhelms you as being the big one -- There are so many that I would almost have to do it on a point-by-point.

And his art, that's another one entirely -- For me, a pet peeve has always been martial artists that claim to have influenced Bruce Lee more than they obviously did, or that trivialize his achievement -- That's always been a pet peeve of mine -- And guys like Gene LaBell come to mind right away -- I don't think Gene LaBell spent any meaningful time with Bruce Lee -- And I say that based at looking at his Daytimers [diaries] -- I don't see Gene LaBell in there -- Gene LaBell saying things like, he went to Bruce's school and almost had to leave and said, "Man, I can't stay in there because of the incense" -- Well, did Dan Inosanto ever tell you that Bruce burned incense in the Chinatown school all the time? -- Was it overwhelming? -- No. So Gene LaBell never set foot in his school -- He also told me that he thought Brandon was better than Bruce -- Okay Gene (laughs) --

You know, Bruce Lee was self-taught -- As you said, you made a good point in one of our earlier conversations -- that you say to people, "If you want to develop Bruce Lee-like qualities then

you've got to put in Bruce Lee-like time and effort." -- And where he would do 2000 punches in a given time-frame, the average martial artist might have done 300 --

Well, I think it takes about 10,000 times to achieve what they might tentatively call mastery of a certain technique -- And that's how Bruce Lee got very good, and that's an individual thing -- You don't do 10,000 punches with a teacher barking at you, you do it when you can find time -- And you do it, and you do it, and you do it and you do it -- So he did that on his own -- And once his rightly-earned success in achieving mastery of this was acknowledged, everybody want to take credit for it -- That's always been a sore spot for me on Bruce Lee, is rather than being held forth as a beacon of what is possible if you too are willing to put forth that kind of time into your training and personal development -- that you can achieve what, for you let's say, is the comparable of what Bruce Lee achieved for him, they try to make it, it's like, "Yeah, well he got it because he got it from me. I taught him this and..." --These individuals are clearly not in the same class as Bruce Lee was.

C: This is why I was asking you about the misperceptions with regard to Jeet Kune Do -- One of the things I try to put forth during seminars I teach, and even in my classes, is the idea of not "memorializing" any particular point in time along Lee's evolution -- For the person who is involved in JKD to truly understand it, they need to follow it all the way through, past the time when, as you said earlier in our conversation, he was considering developing a system and then naming it, all the way up to when he was throwing things away and getting rid of the idea of "styles" completely -- But some people will just stop at one particular point, whether you want to call it the "Los Angeles era" or the "Seattle era" or the "1966-1969 period" -- But to me, to understand JKD you've got to look at the entire process.

J: Yes, I agree with you -- And like Bruce Lee said, and it's not a statement said a lot, "It [JKD] is a mirror in which to reflect yourself." -- And that is YOU -- You've got to do the work, you've got to do the practice -- You've got to learn about yourself -- You've got to learn what your attributes are and how to cultivate those attributes -- And you've got to be willing to put in the thousands of hours or even tens of thousands of hours required to achieve proficiency in doing it so that it becomes a reflex -- And that's what Bruce Lee did.

It's funny, I mean he studied formally for what was it, three years, maybe four years at the most? -- From age fifteen to eighteen. He was eighteen when he left Hong Kong -- He had three years of Wing Chun training -- And I'm sure he practiced that very diligently -- But then, it was shortly after he got to the States until the day he died, he was self-taught -- By far the greatest amount of time was self-teaching from Bruce Lee.

C: You put in several of the articles you wrote that you believed that it was Bruce Lee's mind that made him so good...

J: Yeah...

C: That's the other point I try make to people, that it was Bruce's thought processes that helped him actualize his potential, and if other individuals can learn to understand those thought processes, then they can either cultivate the same or similar processes to use for themselves...

J: I think one of the problems too is that a lot of people don't see themselves as being significant -- We have a real complex about that -- There are other people like Bruce Lee, who was significant, and reveled in it, and we all are like, "Man, I'd like to be that confident" or "I'd like to be this or that..." -- And unfortunately, we discount ourselves, and it becomes, instead of being the path that Bruce revealed to us to get us to the same top of the mountain he was at, we just want to fixate on the person on the top of the mountain, and it becomes a case of hero-worship -- And hero-worship's only value is in that it lights a fire under us, shows us what's possible for us to achieve -- It's very odd that we're very content to be sludge at the bottom of the pool, and to just look up at the guy that's at the top of the mountain and say, "Yeah, that's what he did, that's what he did..." -- But are you going to do it? -- "Nope, nope, but boy isn't he something. And he did this, and he wore this type of clothes. And it sort of gives me this affinity to him if I do the same thing." -- His message was bigger than that -- But it also might explain to a large extent why very few people do it -- I mean, very few people look at what his finger was pointing at, because the finger itself is so attractively packaged.

C: Or perhaps, like you said, that they realize that there's so much work involved.

J: Yeah, and people are very reticent -- In the same way they're reticent to exercise hard and tap those faster-twitch fibers that are unpleasant -- The time dedication, the what they might perceive as a monotonous repetition of neural training until they get it right -- They almost look at that in too big a picture and say, "Oh man, that mountain is way too high to climb." -- And they never make the journey, not realizing that if they just start out, it's not that overwhelming, but you do just have to keep putting one foot ahead of the other on a daily basis, and keep doing it -- And pretty soon you're halfway up the mountain -- And then it's like, "Wow, I can probably make it all the way up there."

But it does require effort and it does require critical thinking -- And in both instances that's energy out -- And we are a species that evolved and survived by conservation of energy -- So, it's unnatural -- I don't accuse these people of being lazy -- It's strictly that they've got to overcome their genetic inheritance of wanting to conserve energy, both physical and mental -- Thinking critically, that requires energy -- But the rewards are so much greater, the breakthroughs are so much more attainable if you're willing to do that rather than nestle into the safety of the herd and not think critically, not expend mental energy and not expend the physical energy necessary to fully realize all of the attributes that you can realize -- And I think that's very significant.

And the statement I made in one of the Bruce Lee books about there being a danger in standing too close to the river of another man's thoughts is very true -- I see that a lot -- That it's easier and less effort to assume a persona than it is to develop your own and cultivate your own.

C: For myself as a teacher, it would be much easier, even teaching JKD, if I when the people came in to train I would simply tell them, "Fine, this is what you're going to do..." -- But part of my thing as a teacher has always been, "It's not about me telling you what to do. If I can get you to understand this, then you can do the work yourself." -- But you run into so much resistance. -- You run into resistance sometimes from the student, but you definitely run into it from the martial art "establishment" -- Because again, it's like you're not supposed to do that -- You're supposed to "hand-walk" the student through some kind of pre-established program -- Or at least it seems that way to me anyway.

J: Well it is. And the thing is, anytime you offer up something in contrast or different than what the others are doing, they feel you've held up a mirror to them in which they see their inadequacies -- And they don't want to confront that because that again requires effort to bring them in line, or to change -- And that's never a welcome proposition -- So whenever something is advanced as different, it's immediately rejected, ignored, ridiculed, and then ultimately, if it's effective, copied and stolen -- But facts are facts -- The facts are the facts on exercise. And the facts are the facts in terms of the mechanics of martial combat -- And facts will ultimately prevail --

It's just a question of...(pauses) ...when you think about it, wouldn't it be nice if everyone embraced this? -- And the reason you and I think that is because then we wouldn't have to work as hard to communicate it -- So we're being intellectually lazy as well -- If everyone embraced it, then, again, there would be no effort to advance the cause, to dig deeper, to research, to be more certain of our facts -- I think the very reason that most people don't is why we do -- Because it's almost like a Yin and Yang, or the crest and the trough of a wave -- If there's one, there must be another -- And you have to fill the voids or the gaps that are there with knowledge -- And we do that -- And I think because there's very few of them, we feel far more comfortable in the more "workman" mode of trying to ferret out data and present it.

C: I'm always hearing statements with regards to JKD in which people say things such as, "We've surpassed what Bruce Lee was doing then", or "A lot of his material is outdated now" ...

J: That's nonsense.

C: When I ask the people making such statements to explain what it is they mean, what I usually get are comments such as, "Well, we've learned a whole bunch of different grappling techniques now" or, "We've evolved Jeet Kune Do." -- I don't understand where they come off with statements like that -- And from my perception of it, and maybe my perception's wrong, is if it [JKD] is all about "totality", how do you evolve totality? -- I mean, a person might enhance their understanding of different elements within totality, but...

J: Yeah, you can't -- Just as a mere definition of terms, you can't -- If something is "omni" or "all", you can't get beyond that -- It's like trying to go beyond 100% -- I mean, in the case of Bruce Lee, he was a very dedicated trainer, and I don't want to say open-minded, but "critical-minded" -- The open-mind just means that you take in everything without any type of analysis -- He had a very active mind and he was willing to put forth the hours necessary to perfect what he was working on -- Other people, just by adding something... okay, you might have more, but that doesn't mean you've evolved in it -- Evolution is usually an adaptation that better enhances your chances of survival.

You know too, if you leave your school and as you're going to your car, some guy grabs you by the legs, which of the seventy-two locks are you thinking of doing, or is a lock even appropriate? -- The important thing is getting away -- Are you able to make the appropriate move that results in your survival? -- And generally, that's not a lot of moves -- So is that necessary? -- Is it an evolution? -- Does it enhance your survival? -- Don't know -- It depends on the circumstance, right?

But a lot of it has to be a willingness, even in a fight, a willingness to engage -- And that is often the biggest attribute -- You can have all the techniques in the world and ‘freeze’ when you’re in a situation that requires, “now is the time you’ve got to exert yourself” -- So even the idea, the model of a guy who is willing and has no compunction about exerting himself mentally and physically to perfect a martial art or his ability to be a ‘martial instrument’, is far more significant -- It does teach a good lesson -- It teaches that there’s more to life than the undemanding and the effortless, and ultimately rewarding, and that some things are only achieved through considerable personal effort and sweat -- And that’s not a bad lesson.

And when it comes to combat, I mean, you’ve probably seen it, there are guys that may not have any martial arts training, but you know on an intuitive level that this guy would be willing to step up -- And then the question is, “Am I willing to step up and exert the kind of energy necessary to overcome the energy he’s going to be expressing?” -- If you’re not, then you politely decline (laughs)... And it doesn’t matter how many locks or anything you know -- I mean, if a guy’s willing... and we’ve seen it too often, even in the mixed martial arts, where a guy’s a terrific ground-fighter, and he knows all the locks and everything else, but he got tagged or he was too fatigued to be able to apply it effectively, and the opportunity got away from him -- So just having a volume of techniques is a distant second to a willingness to exert oneself to 100% of their momentary ability until there’s no energy left -- And that’s something you can get from training, whether it’s with weight training, or hitting the heavy bag, or what have you, that over time, an energy investment is not off-putting to you, because you know you can do it, and do it repeatedly.

C: Do you feel there is a difference between JKD and MMA?

J: Yeah -- On the most fundamental level there are rules in MMA -- And Bruce said that in the Pierre Burton interview, “If you’re talking about sport, that’s one thing. If you’re talking about combat “as it is”, that’s something else” -- Well, JKD is combat “as it is” -- So there’s a delineation right there -- There are no regulations, there are no rules in a street encounter -- I’ll tell you what I like and don’t like, as an individual, on the JKD front -- One, I think the further Bruce went along the path, his whole thing was about fighting -- and it was, “How do I overcome this?” -- That was the analyst in him -- “If I fight a guy who is a kicker, what do I do? If I fight a guy who is a, what do I do? How do I develop a high kick in case that presents itself? And how can I do that with force?” -- All of this stuff -- And what I’ve always found with martial arts, is that you can spend thousands of hours training for a fight that’s never going to come -- And if it’s never going to come, you know, it’s almost like watching a retired boxer doing his road work, and he’s working out hard, because he might get a fight -- And he does that for fifteen years and never gets a fight -- It’s wasted effort -- It’s wasted effort in that you can get the health benefits from that, with a lot less investment in time -- So there has to be something a little more to one’s wanting to learn a martial art than just ‘a fight’ -- And I think, initially what I liked about the early stuff Bruce did, although technically it wasn’t as complete or total, say, as what JKD became, it was nice to have a little system if you, from an art standpoint -- You learn this, you learn the mechanics -- It wasn’t all about fighting -- There was a philosophical system that underpinned it that was very cool -- He was able to, in many respects, introduce some very cool elements of Chinese culture to people who were ignorant of it -- And it’s always had a certain romantic interest in that era of his -- And then later it became about his own development -- So the system went away, and it was mainly about him preparing for a fight –

Ted Wong told me that Bruce told him at one point that he thought Yip Man was trying to send someone over to kill him at some point -- So he wanted to learn how to overcome, what he saw at the time, from his younger training, as a pretty formidable fighting system -- And work outside the system so that he could defend himself -- But he always seemed to have a mindset that people were gonna try and get him -- So he was constantly training for a fight, but it never came -- And to me, on the positive it resulted in the creation of the most celebrated martial artist that's ever lived -- But on the negative, there's a lot of time away from family, a lot of time taken away from other pursuits that he may well blossomed in -- I mean, he was a very talented artist -- That just kind of was on the side -- It wasn't necessary that he develop artistic skills or music skills or anything like that -- But when you talk about the 'totality' of a human being, those are all of those attributes that need attention and cultivation -- And you can develop a total, more fuller human being out of it.

C: So one thing can become the only colour in a person's paintbox, versus seeing the entire spectrum of colours --

J: And I think for Bruce, and it sounds really cheap for someone to say something that isn't, because we're always used to praise, but, I think the idea of training just for a fight or fighting, limits you to some extent -- And I can see if you say, "Well, it has health benefits" -- That's true, and that's good -- But that wasn't what he was training solely for -- The only reason he wanted the health benefits was because he had had a fight where he didn't think his endurance was as good as it should have been -- It was always geared to fighting -- And in that respect, I kind of liked his earlier stuff where he thought a fight should be over quick and you didn't need a ton of conditioning for it -- That was intriguing and it was different and to me at least it was exotic -- I can't dispute the fact that if you're interested in fighting, if you're interested in really doing damage to something, then yeah, JKD is the real deal, because it's, as he [Lee] said, it's about fighting "as it is" -- So no, I don't think the MMA connection is... as long as there is an arena with rules, it had nothing to do with JKD -- That would be my thought anyway --

C: In numerous articles and interviews you have talked about that when it comes to Jeet Kune Do, people either "get it" or they don't -- Can you explain what the "it" is that people should get?

J: Whew, that's a tough question, because the "it" depending on the day you speak to me, I might feel I don't have a firm grasp on it yet ...

C: My point is, with all the other stuff we've read, you've pointed out numerous times about the idea of "getting what Bruce Lee was pointing at" ...

J: Well, I mean the big thing there is the development of the self, the "root" -- The "it" isn't simply enrolling in a class and going through motions, or studying every martial art under the sun because you heard that -- You've actually got to research this too, if Bruce Lee is your role model -- And this actually goes back to... look at his daytime diaries... and lay out a class curriculum of any martial art school, and then lay out what he did...

C: Right....

J: ... And you're going to see a vast difference -- And the vast difference comes down to individual effort -- I mean, what's interesting is that Bruce Lee started martial arts when he was around 13 or 14 I think, if I'm not mistaken -- He took Wing Chun and he studied formally for about five years or so with a teacher, and he went to classes, and he had some private instruction -- We all know the story -- Nobody spoke about him -- He wasn't a dynamo -- Nothing about that caused him to explode -- But what happened was, he didn't just stop at the classes... Even then, when he was home he was practicing, he was jumping over tables, he was pushing his hand against a desk to develop better energy for chi sao -- And then when he came to the States when he was eighteen, and remained there until he was probably thirty, that's when he developed -- But who did he study under in the States? -- Nobody, he was self-taught, he was self-trained -- So any of his development, when he became Bruce Lee, the phenomenal martial artist, it was all through the personal dint of effort that he put into his own development -- This researching training as best as the knowledge existed at the time, he was into that thoroughly -- Looking at the mechanics of how the human arm and body and waist and legs are involved when a punch is thrown, you know, for power -- And a kick -- And working on it and working on it and working on it -- You see in the daytimers... I mean 500 punches at a shot, per arm -- And then it was at the point where he was doing arms three days a week and legs three days a week, and what areas of emphasis he thought were important, from the abdominals to the forearms... all of that.

So the "it" is a self-cultivation -- And as such, it's very difficult, even for me, or you, to look at someone and say, "That guy doesn't get it." ... because I don't know what the guy does in his spare time... (laughs)... I mean, maybe he does get it, maybe he working really, really hard... But if he's memorizing dialogue from Bruce Lee's films or passages from his books without any emotional attachment or real-world application of that, then I'd say it's lip-service -- You can theorize it, you can amass a tremendous Bruce Lee collection, you can read every word the guy ever wrote -- I mean, that's like having a car with no transmission in it, or even having a car with a transmission in it but never getting in it to drive it -- It's just, "There's the car".... there's this body of knowledge -- I have all of Bruce Lee's books." -- But when you ask "So what do you do?" the guy suddenly goes, "Uh...." And gets this vague, blank look on his face -- So the "it" Bruce Lee was pointing at was...

C: Self-development...?

J: Yeah, and not self in the abstract, but your "self" -- And that's the big thing -- What are you doing with it?

C: Your personal development...

J: Yeah, I mean... I know that like, when I studied with Ted, it was funny -- I remember the first time I was training with him, I was useless -- You know, I had trained in martial arts for a long time and had my own routines on heavy bag, top-and-bottom bag, bean bag -- And when he was asking me to hit the heavy bag I felt like my legs were in cement, and I couldn't get my brain to function properly to do it, because I was thinking about everything I could remember about what Bruce said, what Bruce wrote, trying to get the mechanics the way he did it -- And I wasn't relaxed, I wasn't being myself, I wasn't just "doing it" -- And it was so frustrating at the time - I couldn't kick worth a damn, I couldn't punch worth a damn -- I think I hit the heavy bag so much that my knuckles were shredded -- I think I bled all over his bag --

It was again, thinking at the time, “Well okay, Ted worked out with Bruce. I’ve got to be at a certain level here otherwise he’s not gonna think I know what I’m doing, and I’m wasting his time.” –

And the reality was the complete opposite of what I should have been doing -- I should have just hit the bag, hit it, hit it, hit in any way I can until I found my own rhythm for it and my own mechanics for it, following within those guidelines of what he was showing me; like the power line, and the vertical fist, and all that sort of stuff, and the use of the hip, and the lead side forward -- And the thing is, if I really wanted to curry his favor, and improve on that, I would have just gone home that night and just practiced and practiced and practiced, and so, I wasn’t thinking about the mechanics or how Bruce did it, and how Ted did it, but how I did it -- And that would’ve been the best way to do it, and eventually, if I really put in Bruce Lee-like hours, I may not have had Bruce Lee-like results but I would have had optimal “John Little” results.

C: I think that’s the main point -- Someone who goes to class two times a week for an hour each time, then does nothing, no thought about it the rest of the time...

J: Yeah, forgets about it when they go home... They’re viewing it solely as a recreation.. a social event -- They go to it and they’re taking what’s called Bruce Lee’s art, but they’ll give it an hour and a half a couple of times a week maybe, and that’s it -- And they accept unconditionally whatever their instructor tells them, whatever he happens to be doing -- And the problem with that is not that instructors will mislead people ... but what I’ve learned from being on the outside looking in and then being on the inside looking out, is that the martial arts is like the fitness industry -- It’s an industry, it’s a business built largely on classes, which means built largely on turnover, which means getting people in -- And the way you get people in is by giving them what they want -- You give them what they want by telling them what they want to hear -- And sometimes, I know this happens in Canada, and I’m sure it happens in the U.S. due to the population disparity, that people say, “Oh Bruce Lee learned this art.” or “He was in touch with my instructor and they shared techniques, and my instructor taught him this...” -- You know, some nonsense which is completely unverifiable or unsubstantiated, and yet people do it because it’s got that [stamp] of Bruce Lee on it somehow, and it’s however fraudulently obtained -- And my problem was always when I got into it initially, I believed everyone was telling the truth -- You know, who would lie? -- Why would they lie about it? -- And I thought, naively, that all of Bruce’s students really loved each other, that they all wanted to work together, and that they all were kind of reading off the same page -- And I didn’t realize that life gets in the way of that -- Someone else who was a friend is now viewed as a competitor for students and that’s taking food off your plate -- So someone has to have his students believe that he is THE guy -- There is only one guy -- And the big joke of it is YOU are the guy -- Doesn’t matter what the student of Bruce’s was or what the pecking order was -- What are YOU doing? -- Are you developing yourself? -- It’s like “shake the hand of the hand of the guy who shook Bruce Lee’s hand” -- It’s all nonsense -- Just because somebody has a lineage, that he knew Bruce Lee or trained with him, or was even made an instructor by him, that doesn’t mean that’s going to have any impact on you at all -- I mean, it might have and him, and his development -- But as far as your development, which is why you’re in the martial arts, to develop yourself, it could have absolutely nothing to do with it -- Ultimately, who is giving you the gift? Is it the instructor, or is it you? -- You know, when you put the hours in, you get the gift -- You get better at what you do --

C: This was exactly why I wanted you to discuss “getting it” -- It doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks about it, what do you, the individual think about it.

J: Yeah, absolutely - Whatever anybody else thinks is what anybody else thinks -- Take the message and develop yourself -- Research in depth so you can better understand, apply, and cultivate the tools that have been shared with you and develop yourself -- That’s the “it” I guess.

C: Is it true you’ve recently finished filming a documentary in which you traveled to all of the various sites where Bruce shot all of his films? --

J: That’s right.

C: I would’ve loved to have done such a thing. What prompted to you to do such a project?

J: It’s funny, when I was a kid growing up in a suburb of Toronto, Canada, and I got my first issue of Fighting Stars magazine, the first one that came out, with Bruce Lee on the cover and “Enter the Dragon”, I wasn’t that interested [in Lee] at the time. I bought the magazine because they had an article on Keye Luke, who was Master Po in the Kung Fu television series.

C: I still have a copy of that magazine...

J: The Kung Fu TV series was the coolest thing in the world,. I was intrigued by the Eastern thought even then, which was cool, and also these sort of exotic moves which were really, really cool. Using certain elements in human energy they could repel numerous adversaries. But, anyway, we were at a cottage that didn’t have a TV or anything there, so I ended up reading the whole magazine, and it talked about Bruce Lee. And he seemed, to all of us, that he was just this really interesting individual. So I made a mental note, because I re-read it several times, and “Enter the Dragon” was coming out and it sounded like a cool plot, you know? I went to the theatre, and was completely unprepared for how that impacted me. It could have been my age, I don’t know. I was twelve, almost thirteen. But seeing Bruce Lee, doing what he was doing, authentic martial art, and also the locales, that always stayed with me.

And through the other films, like when he did “Chinese Connection”, that whole ‘kwoon’ idea and the school and the people training, that was neat. That stayed with me. The film “The Big Boss”, with the fight on the front lawn...I mean, who, among us, as Bruce Lee fans, hadn’t thought, “Geez, I wonder if that place is still there? Wouldn’t it be cool to go there, and if not walk in Bruce Lee’s footsteps, at least see what he saw, and see this place up close, to see what it would have been like?” So, that was always in my mind. But it just never seemed practical. You know, when you’re working or teaching at a school, how often can you even allow yourself to think, “Geez, I’d love to go to Thailand and see where Pak Chong is.” But anyway, I got a call from John Walker, who was one of the partners when we did “Bruce Lee -- A Warrior’s Journey”, and he said that he would really like to go and see some of the locations where Bruce did his stuff. And I told him that I’d always wanted to go where the films were made. And he thought that we would be great. Anyway, I did up a budget for the film and it was accepted, and I thought, “Cool”. Then the real work began, which was, where are these places? Do they still exist? But it was cool. I mean, I feel almost embarrassed to say how many times I’d seen these films in the theaters. But to go there, and to go where he walked, and see, in some cases how they’ve changed, and in some cases how they haven’t, was fascinating. Like, the Big Boss’

house looks the same today as when they filmed the movie. The same swimming pool out front, same spirit house behind the pool, same steps, same frame, same roof, same interior. We even went downstairs where Bruce and James Tien filmed their scenes and they had the same yellow tile steps.

C: So you actually went inside the house?

J: Yeah, and there it was. Apart from the monks, I don't think anyone had been down there since then. It was cool. Finding the little waterfall that Lee sat next to in "The Big Boss" and seeing the hotels he stayed in when he was there, which are still standing, that was cool. Going to the ice factory, which is still making ice after all these years was very neat. And it had a different feeling. To me, it was almost like the closest thing to a religious experience.

C: Did you go to Italy where Lee filmed "Way of the Dragon" as well?

J: Yeah, that was cool. We saw the locations where he did his exterior work and it was the same thing. Most of the exteriors are still there, including that Giuliano's coffee place, you know, the café that he walks in front of. I mean, that was almost forty years ago and it's still there. The place where Lee looked out over the Roman Forum. Where he walked through the Colosseum and the gate he shook. And everything just kind of flooded back. You're talking about a key period of our adolescence or our youth where aged twelve to present day I've been watching Bruce with these backgrounds going past him.

And we went to Macao, where he did the "No Dogs and Chinese Allowed" scene in the park, and that hasn't changed. The same wrought-iron gates are in front of the park. That was neat. I mean, how many times did we sit in theaters and watch "The Chinese Connection"? And then Enter the Dragon", which was very cool too, where he did the "Lau's time" scene, and the scene with [the Shaolin priest} Roy Chuaio, and the scene where he sat down with Mr. Braithwaite. All of those places are perfectly preserved. Golden Harvest studios has now been torn down and replaced with two large apartment buildings. And Han's island, of course, wasn't an island at all. But seeing the jetty where they got onto the island in the film, that's still there. So that was cool. And the tennis courts where the fight scenes were filmed have all been pretty much destroyed. But there are still remnants, and all the memories kind of come back. like, "This was Han's compound." And the cemetery where Lee filmed that scene. It took forever to find it and find the right gravestone, but we found it.

C: It sounds like the film will be a real treat for anyone who is a fan of Bruce Lee and his films. What are your plans for it?

J: Well, it's been over a year of editing and re-editing. Now it's at the hands of a distributor now and their job is to try and secure television sales, and to a lesser extent dvd sales. So that's what they're working on. But I tell you, it was the trip of a lifetime, it really was.

C: I look forward to seeing it when it comes out. Thanks again for taking the time to chat.

J: You're welcome.



John Little

John Little is considered one of the world's foremost authorities on the life and work of Bruce Lee, his training methods, and his philosophy. John has been the only person authorized by the Bruce Lee estate to review and use the entirety of Lee's personal notes, sketches, and reading annotations. He edited a five-volume series of books on Lee's material. In addition, John served as the associate publisher of Bruce Lee magazine, the managing editor of *Knowing Is Not Enough*, the official newsletter of the JJKD Nucleus, and as a director of the non-profit Bruce Lee Foundation.

In the world of strength and fitness training, John Little would certainly be considered an iconoclast. Recognized as "one of the top fitness researchers in North America", John has exposed and laid to rest many of the myths, lies and fallacies that surround the world of bodybuilding and fitness training. Utilizing scientific principles instead of following tradition and dogma, he is the innovator of three revolutionary training protocols, including Max Contraction Training. A prolific writer, John has authored 12 books on exercise and 38 books on philosophy, history, and martial arts. In addition his numerous articles have been published in every fitness and martial art magazine in North America.



Chris Kent

With over 40 years experience, Chris Kent is widely acknowledged as one of the world's foremost authorities on Jeet Kune Do, and has gained international recognition for his knowledge and leadership in perpetuating the art, training methods, and philosophy developed by the legendary Bruce Lee. As a teacher, professional consultant, and speaker, Chris has traveled the world, teaching and sharing the benefit of his expertise in the art and philosophy of Jeet Kune Do with thousands of people.

Chris has authored 3 of the highest rated books on Jeet Kune Do: *The Encyclopedia of Jeet Kune Do*, *Jeet Kune Do - The Textbook*, and *Jeet Kune Do Kickboxing*. In addition he has both written for and appeared in countless martial art publications both nationally and internationally including *Inside Kung Fu*, *Black Belt*, *Martial Art Masters*, *Budo International*, *Combat* and *Martial Arts Illustrated*. He has also written and produced 3 series of training videotapes and DVDs which remain the standard of the industry. His latest book, "LIBERATE YOURSELF! - A Guide to Personal Freedom" and "P.L.A.N. - Personal Liberation Action Notebook" detail how individuals can apply the philosophical tenets of self-actualization utilized by Bruce Lee to their own lives.

Chris was a one of the co-founders of "The Bruce Lee Educational Foundation", a non-profit, organization created for the purpose of perpetuating Bruce Lee's art and philosophy for future generations, and for 5 years served as a member of the Board of Directors.

JKD Conversations with John Little

(Part 2)



Chris Kent

www.personalliberation.com

JKD Conversations with John Little (Part 2)

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Introduction



I have had the privilege of knowing John Little since 1996, and consider him a good friend. I have had the privilege of knowing John Little since 1996, and consider him a good friend. Personally, I consider him one of the most knowledgeable people on the planet with regard to both Bruce Lee's art and philosophy of Jeet Kune Do, and a trail-blazer in the world of strength training and fitness. When I approached him about putting material together from our telephone conversations and creating a pdf article for people to read, his response was an enthusiastic, "Yes, by all means!"

The following transcripts are excerpts from two telephone interviews I conducted with John between 2009 and 2011. During our marathon conversations (which were usually 2-3 hours in length) we covered numerous topics including the state of the fitness industry today, fitness and exercise, Bruce Lee and the art and philosophy of Jeet Kune Do, and yes, even the world of JKD politics. As you will see, in much of the interviews, instead of using periods to mark such things as the end of sentences, I have chosen to simply put dashes, because our conversations flowed in a very natural and fluid manner, sometimes darting off in a different direction and then returning to a particular subject.

I have one request from you, the reader, and that is that you read the material here within without any pre-conceptions and with an open mind. As Bruce Lee himself said, "Do not start from a conclusion." You may find yourself agreeing with some things and disagreeing with others, and that is perfectly fine. My goal is to simply share material with you that may enhance your personal growth, be it as a martial artist, and/or as a human being.

With that said, I invite you to "Read On!"

PART 2

C: You have written for various bodybuilding magazines for years. It seems as if every time you see a men's fitness magazine these days they are featuring some UFC champion on their cover and a breakdown of their training regimen inside -- Isn't this like the bodybuilding magazines which feature a recent champion on the cover and a breakdown their training regimen inside?

J: Yeah, absolutely it's the same thing -- And if you really follow the trend you will have that prior to this, with the UFC fighters, it was WWE wrestlers -- Before, it was the bodybuilders, and their market was always small -- I mean, bodybuilding is never something that has been openly embraced by the public, because their look and their appearance was off-setting to most people for the very reason that they were freakish, that it was not the norm, and never ever represented what a normal, well-developed human looked like -- And that's mainly because of the chemicals that came into it -- When the drugs came in from the 1960's on, the interest, usually among sixteen to eighteen year-old males grew, because every kid wanted the "gorilla suit," and "these guys obviously must know how to do it, because, look at them" -- And again, drugs were never mentioned, the steroids specifically -- And now UFC has become the big sport, so now they go to these guys.

C: In the same way that there is a big difference between a professional body-builder and the average person who goes to the gym and trains, I think there is a big difference between a professional MMA fighter who is training for an upcoming fight and the average martial artist who is training for recreational or self defense purposes...

J: You think?...

C: But I think that many average or recreational martial artists read these articles and then attempt to follow the same training protocols or regimens that are being used by these world champions. How much relevance do these sort of routines have for the average martial artist who is training?

J: They have none. I mean, when you're talking about the average person, you're talking about people in the middle of the "Bell curve", and that's eighty-five percent of us. There are "outliers" on any genetically expressed trait, a couple of standard deviations to the right and a couple of standard deviations to the left. And those to the left couldn't do one of those workouts. I mean, it would kill an adult gorilla. And the ones to the right might be able to tolerate one, two, three, four, or five, and then that would be it. I mean, that example is more like people who buy the 'Bowflex' or the 'Nordic Track' and they go at it three times a week for twenty minutes, and they can't even stay with that. So if you want to drive students away from martial arts, you give them that kind of a training program. Because their body will eventually send a signal to their consciousness that they don't want to go back. And they may not precisely why, but it will be overtraining. It's just gross overtraining and it's pointless.

C: Let's discuss the state of the fitness industry today. There seems to be a continual stream of new fads in relation to fitness training that appear on the market. On television you see a constant barrage of infomercials demonstrating some new piece of equipment supposedly guaranteed to produce amazing results, an exotic new dance form promising to help you shed pounds, or some militaristic fitness "boot-camp" to whip you into shape. Nowadays we see a lot of people engaged in activities such as pulling weighted sleds, lifting tractor tires, hitting things with sledgehammers, throwing weighted medicine balls, twirling Indian clubs, etc. What is your opinion on all of this?

J: Well, it depends upon which one you're speaking of. My opinion on all of them, to sum it up in one word is, "needless." Another one would be "inefficient," and "unnecessarily nostalgic." I mean, Indian clubs or kettle-bells are "ancient." And hitting tires...

C: Aren't many of these so-called new methods simply old training methods that have been "re-invented" so to speak? In the olden days, when boxers were training for a fight, many times their coaches would have them doing such things as chopping down trees or splitting logs with an axe...

J: Yeah. Before that, in the time of John L. Sullivan, they would go for a brisk walk. How's that for fitness? But it's like re-introducing that. It's like saying, "Well, you know John L. Sullivan, we're still talking about him today. He was a bare-knuckle fighter, kind of a prototype for a UFC type guy who is no-holds barred, or at least bare-knuckle, no gloves and very few rules. And you know, he'd drink a lot of whiskey and go for a walk. That's the new program. It's the "John L. Sullivan Program" ... the "Boston Strongboy." And he was able to lift a streetcar off its tracks, so the legend has it. So it's old stuff because basically they've run out of room. I think the romantic spirit of it is that they're going to look to the past, and see, you know, sort of in that whole false premise of cross-training, and they're going to look at what the best of the past did and incorporate it into the future, or into the present, with other stuff that we've got in the present, and then we've got this "super" training approach that takes the best of everything. And it's just the ignorance of the past trying to mix in with the ignorance of the future, and that doesn't give you anything positive. They didn't know any better in the past, that's why they did it that way. I mean it was a slow, steady evolution, and not much of an evolution.

C: In the same way that many martial art students walk into the school and expect the teacher to "hand them the truth", do you think that, when it comes to fitness training, many people go into a gym and expect a trainer or the owner of the gym to be a knowledgeable fitness professional who will "give them the truth" about fitness and exercise? It seems that many of the people working at these places are merely reciting the party line so to speak, what they have been told to say...

J: Well, yes. I mean, if people go in you've got two issues to deal with. You've got the psyche [mind] and the soma [body]. And psychologically they know that they are unhappy with where they are. And they look at someone else with better attributes and say, "I would be happier if I was that." But they don't realize that person is two deviations to the right or the left of the Bell Curve. They don't have the genes to ever be like that, which is why they're not.

I always liken it in the case of bodybuilding to the fact that eighty five percent of us are quarter-horses. And they're beautiful animals, they're sleek and they are muscular, and they're very efficient. But, they're not Clydesdales. Clydesdales are just freakishly big horses. And it's like quarter-horses subscribing to "Clydesdale Monthly," and they see this great big, monstrously-muscled animal and they say (especially young quarter-horses), "Boy, I want to be like that guy. Imagine the mares that guy must get..." and, "No one is gonna mess with him." And so, you go to the Clydesdale and you say, "What do you do?" And the Clydesdale says, "Well, I eat a lot of oats and I pull beer wagons.." And the quarter-horse says, "Well, I'm gonna do that because I wanna be big." Well, good luck quarter-horse, because you know what? It ain't gonna happen, because you don't have the genes to be a Clydesdale. The same is true with people that read bodybuilding magazines that either (a) aren't pumped full of physiology-changing drugs that change their physiology, or (b) don't have a deletion of a gene called myostatin which is responsible for how much muscle mass you produce. If you don't have either of those factors going for you, you're never going to look like these guys, irrespective of what these guys do. You can look at how the training methods have changed to some extent, and it really doesn't matter what the champion does. Whether he does five sets of ten reps, or twenty sets of thirty reps, or sixty sets of something else, most of the bodybuilding champions look the same. And so, it's not the training that's producing this change, or is solely responsible for this change, it's something else. And the one thing about the drugs, whether it's myostatin, which is actually a protein, which the more of it you have, the less muscle your body is able to produce, is in those cases, you don't have to do much of anything, You just have to have, sort of that physiologic soil if you will, and it's very fertile and responsive, and capable of allowing your muscles to grow bigger. And as far as the truth goes, yeah, everybody thinks there is a secret, a secret that's going to change their DNA.

C: In a recent interview you commented that if people truly understood the causal relationship between activity and appearance it would radically alter their attitude to training. Is that part of what you're talking about in terms of the Clydesdale and the quarter-horse and things like that?

J: Yeah. Well it does. I mean, there is a cause and effect, but the cause of the exercise stimulus producing the effect of the desired result, the degree to which that can be effective is solely dependent upon your genetic makeup. And so, you can train like anybody. And believe me, as somebody who has come up for over thirty years regarding bodybuilding magazines and that as sacred scripture, and that these were oracular pronouncements from the champions on how they arrived at their physique level, I've tried tons of these different systems and methods, and not one of them had any magical effect on me.

And I would, given your background in the martial arts, and the different arts that you've gone through in the hope that this is somehow going to bestow upon you this exceptional martial arts ability that you didn't have prior to your martial arts journey, that it was the same thing. Yeah, you learned some martial arts, but they didn't make you a better martial artist. The only difference there was you kind of recognizing what your potential was and fulfilling it that way, and what you attributes and abilities were and cultivating those, whatever they may be, however great or however small, that's what made you a better martial artist. It wasn't doing, in your case, simply Chai Siruste's method and Hawkin Cheung's Wing Chun method, and of course going back to Bruce Lee... I mean, let's be realistic and really pull back and look at the picture. And you look at Bruce Lee's attributes...who has equaled that, among anybody who has studied his art? And there are now, what tens of thousands? And we still have the one.

That makes a case there for genetics...and I would also apply genetics to an individual's ability to commit himself in such a dedicated fashion to the neural development or skill training that obviously Bruce Lee did. You know better than the amount of time he put into his training. And that's how he got good at it.

And you can't do that by doing different martial arts. It's like the analogy Doug [Doug McGuff -- co-author] used in our book, Body By Science. And actually he got it from someone else... but about the golfer. You know, if you go out to the driving range and you use every club in your bag and whack a bucket of balls... that can be likened to trying different martial arts or different martial art techniques. You do a little bit of this, a little bit of that, put some time into this, some time into that. As against the guy who takes a seven iron and he goes out with a bucket of balls and his sole purpose is to put it twenty feet from the cup each time. Well that guy is going to be able to do it eventually. And Bruce Lee was like that with techniques. If you look at his training drills, it was working on the heavy bag on the lead punch, you know, five hundred punches. This is five hundred... this is five hundred. And that's what he worked on. I defy anyone to go through his papers and say that today he was doing Thai boxing for an hour and a half, and then the next week he was going to do whatever the art du jour, I don't know, I guess it's Brazilian Jiu Jitsu today. That's just not the way you cultivate the attributes. The attributes find you, through dedicated work, rather than the other way around.

C: I've been in martial art schools where now, in addition to regular martial art training, they offer students classes such as "combat conditioning" or "fighting fitness," often because the instructor has either been to a workshop, attended a seminar, or read a martial art business magazine article regarding adding all of these types of training methods to their curriculum or training program, often as a separate class geared around "functional fitness." I have a fitness book geared towards martial artists in which the author writes that "one of the benefits of studying and applying the exercises in his book that the individual's functional strength, flexibility and endurance will increase over 500%." What do you think of claims like this?

J: That's quite a claim. Well, for me personally it's, "Well, where's the data? What is he basing this on? Was it done with a double-blind, objectively-controlled study, or was it someone who was completely green and maybe ten years old? ...versus his abilities at ten and his abilities at eighteen." Well, yeah, maybe you might get a five hundred percent improve. But that would be... I think it would take those individuals more time to write their manuals than it did to research them. Anything with ridiculous claims, you've always got to step back. The more extraordinary the claim, the more extraordinary the evidence is required to support the claim. And there's no evidence. I don't see any evidence or anything other than unsubstantiated claims, or they try and boxcar it to somebody who has a public profile for being exceptional in some particular field. And that's the testimonial.

C: When I look at an exercise or training method, be it for myself or anybody I'm working with, I always examine from the perspective of risk vs. benefit ratio --

J: That's a good way to analyze it...

C: It seems like some of these exercises that people are doing now put extreme loads on a person's muscles and joints in unusual or different positions, like depth jumping --

J: Oh God, yeah -- That stuff's dangerous...

C: And it seems to me that a lot of the people are unaware of the potential damage they might be doing to their body by engaging in some of these activities --

J: Well all damage is caused by force -- And it's when the force that is acting on a muscle or a structure exceeds the strength of that respective muscle or structure -- That's the only way you can get injured -- So if you have a groin muscle for instance, that is going to tear when eighty pounds of force is applied to it -- You're safe up to seventy-nine pounds of force -- As soon as it clicks over that to eighty or eighty-one pounds you've got an injury -- Well, force is mass times acceleration -- So, if you, sort of without thought dramatically increase one, the other, or both, you've almost exponentially increased the odds that you're going to have an injury -- And the thing is, exercise falls in a very specific category -- Anything that's sort of on the periphery of that is not only unnecessary, but can increase the chance for an injury -- Because you've either increased the speed at which you're doing something, or the load or the mass, or both -- And it's not necessary for exercise or for health or for fitness -- All you're doing is developing a skill set to do a very potentially dangerous type of activity --

So, a lot of martial artists, the general public, are at much greater risk of being hurt in their training session than they are in a fighting situation -- They may not even make it to the fight because they will have injured themselves --

C: It seems that many people are spending so much getting ready for these things -- I mean, who is to say how long a fight is going to be? -- That's where we start getting into all those subjects you and I have talked about --

J: Yeah, that's true -- What type of conditioning are we talking about? --What kind of a fight?

C: That's why I was saying that we need to make a clear delineation between a professional MMA fighter training for say, five or ten rounds or a boxer...

J: Yeah, a sport --

C: And the average person walking down the street who suddenly gets into it, and you know, it may be over in ten seconds or it may not -- I remember you mentioned in another interview about the boxer Roberto Duran, talking about some forty-five minute brawl he had --

J: Yeah, in the street -- He said that was his toughest fight, not anything he had in the ring -- It was a forty-five minute street-fight in Panama -- You can imagine what that would've been like -- How do you train for that? -- And a lot of it's nonsense -- I mean, martial arts and bodybuilding are two of the most myth-laden activities that human beings have ever come up with -- What we have to do is pull back, really back, and look at how our bodies respond to an exercise stimulus, because our genetics have been programmed to respond in a certain way, to a certain type of stimulus -- And, in our case, in the case of human beings, that came out of fight-or-flight situations that would occur in our hunter-gatherer era, and primarily in the hunter era, which lasted depending upon which authority you go to, anywhere from a hundred thousand to a million years -- And that's what allowed for the encoding of our response to that --

Well, a fight-or-flight response in that time didn't happen on a daily basis -- it was very, very infrequent -- Which is what allowed us to survive -- But when it did happen it was very intense, it was very demanding, it involved all, generally speaking, three classes of muscle fibers, slow twitch, intermediate twitch and fast twitch, and it was over relatively briefly -- And it didn't occur again -- And certainly the person that it happened to didn't go out looking for it to occur again -- The environment kind of brought it into his face again at sort of, these irregular intervals -- That's how our response to exercise came about -- So you've got intense muscular effort that uses all three types of fibers, doesn't last very long, and is infrequently encountered --

Now contrast that with, "Well, today I'm going to do cardio for three hours, and tomorrow I'm gonna do this, and the day after I'm gonna do that, after and after and that's gonna get me combat-ready -- Well that's like a hunter-gatherer being exposed to an intense fight-or-flight situation on a daily basis -- He would be dead inside a year easily -- The body simply couldn't recover from that -- So you're setting up a situation whereby the average person is getting augured into the ground physiologically over time until either they get weaker to the point where they've lowered their threshold for injury, and now a force acts upon them that normally they would be able to endure, but now produces an injury and they're on the shelf, or they give up training altogether because they're just simply too depleted or they've caught a cold because the over-training has lowered their immune system resistance, what have you -- But we should never lose sight of the fact that these little, infrequently performed intense bouts of fight-or-flight are what set our fitness response --

But you know it makes as much sense for the average person to ask a UFC fighter how he ought to fight to get combat-ready as it would to ask a lion -- It's a similar applicability --

C: Does this go back to what we were talking about with the memberships of the gyms, in that it seems like people are being entrained if you will, that they've got to be doing something everyday? -- Maybe it stems from the old work ethic that "idle hands are the devils' playthings" or whatever, but many people nowadays are anxious if they're not in the gym or they're not doing something --

J: Yeah -- Well what you're dealing with there is a neuroses -- And there are people that are prone to that, you know -- And you can feed that very easily with exercise -- But, it also kind of follows, one would presume logically the assumption -- You watch a soccer player, and he's able to do amazing things with the ball, and you ask him what he did -- Well, he practiced -- He did it whenever he got home from school -- You know, he was kicking the ball, using his head -- A hockey player comes home and shoot pucks for three hours -- A golfer, he practices his swing everyday as often as he can -- Well, it seems to be a logical extension -- Well, there's a guy with a very well-developed physique or tremendous cardiovascular system -- Well, he probably must practice that a lot -- Well, there's a disconnect there because actually, the conclusion doesn't follow from the premise -- One is a skill set which, yes, you can and should train as often as you can, like a martial art technique let's say, or a form, depending on which martial art that you're in -- And then there's actual physical conditioning, which is a different species, and that should not be done very often --

Physical Conditioning vs. Skill Conditioning

C: Can you explain the difference between physical conditioning and skill conditioning? --

J: Physical conditioning is demanding muscular, metabolic work that stimulates the body, or prompts the body to produce physiological change, in the sense of either adding to its muscle tissue, or the number of mitochondria in the case of a very demanding aerobic event -- And this is not something that is quickly done --

Skill conditioning is something that is more neuromuscular -- It's a neurological event that readies the athlete to, or betters the athlete in the performance of the task they need to do for competition -- So that's the mechanics -- And you can do that as often as you want -- I mean, the more often you do it the better you get at it -- But it's not demanding to the same degree that physical conditioning is -- You recover from it almost instantly because it's not that demanding, typically uses what we call the lower order motor units or muscle fibers, so slow twitch or maybe a few intermediate twitch, which have a much quicker recovery profile than fast twitch fibers which have a much longer recovery profile, because again, they're on our body for fight-or-flight purposes -- And because fight-or-flight events never occurred in our species on a predictable, regular basis, our body never evolved the mechanism or means to have them recover at a much quicker pace -- Because it wasn't necessary -- And so those two things should never be mixed -- It's also why you shouldn't try to make your martial art skill training exercise -- You shouldn't try and do punches with weights --

C: So punching with weighted gloves or kicking with heavier shoes doesn't actually increase a martial artist's skills they are not using them? --

J: It's only increasing their skills to punch with weights or kick with heavier shoes -- It has absolutely zero transfer to punching faster without those things in your hands --

C: What about transference of skill? -- You've got, for example, people talking about standing on a wobble board or sitting on a Swiss ball while doing a weight training exercise --

J: Well what they're doing in that instance is simply developing a new skill set -- But to be able to stand on a wobble board or whatever that particular event is -- Skills are always very specific to the event or the activity that you're doing

C: So when people say, "I'm doing this exercise on a Swiss ball because it's going to improve my balance in motion when I'm doing martial arts", that's really kind of a fallacy? --

J: It is a fallacy -- What they're doing is, it's like juggling, you know -- Juggling does require coordination, but if you practice juggling, you will be better at juggling -- It doesn't mean you're going to be a better puncher -- Or that you're going to be able to do "pak sao, lop sao" hand immobilizations in combination better -- There apples and oranges -- It's like painting -- Like, "I'm going to paint because that's going to teach me dexterity of my hands, and that will make me better at doing a finger jab" -- You'll never see a pianist training on a typewriter, for instance, because there's no cross-over to that -- Even if they seem somewhat similar, they're a different skill set you're developing --

“Fresh” skill sets vs. “Fatigued” skill sets

C: Sometimes a martial art instructor or trainer will have their students practice a specific fine skill at the end of an exhausting workout, when the student is very tired -- Their theory is that doing so will result in a more economical use of motion, force, etc. on the part of the student, as well as teach the student how to do something when they are very tired-- Is this is sound training advice or are they laying down a different neural skills? --

J: The latter -- They're learning a “fatigued skill set” which they can use if they happen to fatigue the same muscle groups in the same order at the same time as they did when they did that particular practice session -- But that is completely different than what they are like when they're fresh -- And what happens is that you develop ... Let's say that your quadriceps muscles are really fatigued... Let's say your martial art instructor has decided to really work your legs.. Let's say you're in a conventional art that has you run around the dojo or school, and then you've got to hold a horse stance for half an hour, and your quads are just “on fire” -- And then he has you do a wall sit for another ten minutes or what have you, and then you're doing kicking -- Well, what's going to happen is, a lot compensatory muscles or ancillary muscles that aren't fatigued are going to do the bulk of the work during the technical part, because the others simply aren't ready to brought into service again -- They're baked -- So these muscles pick up the slack, and they get your leg up to throw a high kick at the heavy bag -- You get through the workout and you think, “My, God, I'm exhausted. But the teacher said this is going to make me better. And I know my legs are “toast” -- So then you get into a sparring session in the next class, without all the running and the wall-sitting and all that -- And when he throw the same kick he is finding that his timing is way off -- Like it's almost happening prematurely -- Well, that's because now the quads are fresh, and they're doing their job, and when they come in you don't need the ancillary muscles to fire at the rate that they did, or in the timing that they did when they were fatigued -- You see that all the time in other sports, and you see it in fighting too -- But I notice it a lot, for instance, in hockey, where I live, where they'll bag-skate the skaters and just skate them until they almost puke, and then they work on shooting -- And the kids are putting the puck in the net, and then a game comes, the kids are a little more recovered, and they're missing the net by ten feet -- Well why is that? -- Well, because the muscles that were fatigued are now recovered, but they're used to training with the other muscles, so the ancillary ones that were doing most of the work when the major ones were fatigued -- But now when the major are recovered, they come in, and that throws off the timing -- You know, if a muscles is tired, this other muscle may have to come at the ten-degree point, another muscle group may pick up the slack at the forty-degree point, and so on -- When that other muscle group is fresh, when they come in, they're coming in now with much more authority, and the object misses the target -- And the same is true in something that is as precise as martial arts -- Because if that happens in a fight, that can be the difference between life and death if you miss your target -- So it could be a very deadly practice in the worst sense of the term for these practitioners who do it that way -- Your training has to be exact, and it has replicate precisely the environment in which the skill set is going to be performed or the competition is going to be performed if it's a competition -- Anything you get away from that is only going to develop a skill set for that, because all athletic skill sets are specific, for the way that they are training --

C: That brings me to the point of the principle of specific motor skill sets and training -- You know the art that I practice, Jeet Kune Do -- Obviously I can't go around actually kicking my training partner in the groin or poking them in the eye, otherwise I wouldn't have very many training partners...

J: Sure you can..... (laughs)

C: So what would be the best way, or how should a martial artist approach this aspect of training? – I mean, you can only get so close to reality --

J: I think, in that instance, you're up against the same thing Bruce Lee was up against -- And not all of us have a James Lee that can create a special type of dummy that is very similar to a human head that you can stick your fingers into the eyes of, or clamp in a headlock until you snap its neck, or kick the shin, and you know, that pipe device he had for that -- And I'm afraid, in that sort of instance, shy of doing it on real bodies, which you can't do, you have to make do -- It just means you can't make do in a situation like that in a more fluid environment, like a fight -- It's more static, unless someone at some point creates a some sort of a moving target with those sorts of attributes, that you can kick and break the shin, or jab into eyes, or what have you, you have to just practice your skill training on equipment that allows you to kick through something so that you know that you could dislocate a knee or break a knee or what have you --

I often thought, and again, this may not be appropriate, and it may not be relevant to what we're talking about, but just as an ancillary thought, and that is, a lot of times, like when said "I'm trying to teach a guy to develop this attribute" -- And it may be that some individuals simply aren't wired for that attribute -- So, that's possible -- So the way you find out what someone's inclinations and attributes are, I would think almost, is, you would have some sort of protection on yourself -- I don't whether it's some sort of body armour, or an air shield, or something, but just rush the guy, and see what his natural reaction is -- And then you say, "Okay, well this guy is more of a "flight" than a "fight" response, so he may be better served with counter-punches or counter-strikes -- The other guy might go right for it -- In which case, you want to develop precision in striking and timing -- And then work on the mechanics of that so the can do it properly -- It's sort of like the three stages of cultivation, right? -- Where you've got these natural responses, and then you've got mechanical responses, which are more proficient, better alignment, etc. -- And then later you've got to try and "marry" those two somehow, so you have less mechanistic response, more natural response, but you're doing it properly -- And then cultivate those -- Like I said, that may be besides the point, but the big thing that seems to be lost when people get into the mechanics of it is their own natural impulse -- In fact, that is what Bruce was trying to "dust off" of James Coburn, right? -- Whatever that mental obstacle is, get rid of it -- Because they're worried about, sort of that reaction -- And both Taky and Dan Inosanto when Bruce was trying to get them to break free ha had to slap them in the face, and then that natural response came out -- But to do it in conjunction with that, I mean, real fighting has very little to do with the art component, you know, and you're dealing with.. again, look at the lions and stuff like that -- You're dealing with instincts, and you're dealing with very, very primal responses and high energy, highly adrenalized events -- So the best thing is how do you get that to better a person's survival in a reflexive manner so they're not even conscious of it -- That's a tough challenge for most people –

C: We've also talked about how even Bruce Lee talked about in JKD the idea of "refining the motion" to find the most efficient way -- If I just go on a guy's instinct, and when I rush him he hooks, but he telegraphs his hook somehow by dropping his hand first, etc., that is not going to bode well for him in a real situation-- However, if I can develop his instinct to get a tight, fast, hook, that's more efficient, isn't that correct? --

J: Yes, well that's this whole thing too -- But that's also sort of seeing, in a way, "What's this genetic material I'm working with here?" -- And in some ways, taking a guy whose natural instinct is always going to be counter-puncher...to try to make him into something that he's not, is the same way of getting the quarter-horse to be the Clydesdale -- And it's almost like, "Okay, well now I get why a "one-size-fits-all" and a so-called "well-roundedness", while very nice in theory, does not have full applicability to people, because that's always been a fly in the ointment, is the person's own natural responses to it -- And I don't know that you can ever "untrain" those -- And if you do I don't know that it's a good thing because it could create obstacles in their successful ability to do other things successfully --

C: You're dealing with, and it's the same I think in any sport, the emotional and mental situations in these pressure situations, and martial art it seems has always been about, or it has been promoted as taking an individual and calming them down and making them very sedate but with all of these skills, and sometimes that is not the way it is --

J: Well, and also I think you're also dealing to a certain extent with how a guy's wired -- And I don't know that we could change the wiring, and if it would be worth it to do that -- Trying to find out" which way the river's flowing" on this guy -- Going and having him channeling that water correctly is a good thing -- Trying to get him to go against the current of his river is perhaps dooming both teacher and student to frustration and failure, because you'll never, I don't think, overcome those -- And if you do, it's going to manifest in a very odd way somewhere else because you're crossing wires there -- So, the idea, and again, I think a lot of it is we like the idea of a well-rounded martial artist who should be able to do all these things -- Why? -- Because that's the totality -- But, that's kind of like saying, "You should have the ability to sprint one hundred yards in under ten seconds because that really shows good speed -- And you should be able to run a marathon because you never know, someone might put a gun to your head and say you've gotta run a marathon -- But we think this is good, we've got to fully develop all of these attributes, and this human being can do it, so why can't you? -- But there's that other individual component which is very genetic --

Cardiovascular Training

C: We often hear martial artists say "I've got to make sure I get my cardio work in", etc. -- So in addition to weight training several times a week, and then doing their skill or technical training, they also go out and do some form of exercise such as running, bike riding, or swimming three or four days per week – What is your opinion of this?

J: Well cardio, just like we talked about before in some of the other events, is specific -- It's a specific adaptation to a specific activity -- Yes, you can get your cardio up for bike riding, to a certain level, but it will not transfer to running –

You can then go and get your cardio up with running to a certain point, and that will not transfer to sparring -- It's very, very specific -- Everything is specific in athletics, and that's because there is no 'central' cardiovascular adaptation with the heart and the arteries, and the capillary tree and things like that -- The adaptations that make you do better at it occur peripherally, in the muscle tissue, and that is where the mitochondria start -- You strengthen a muscle, or mitochondria, and the more efficiently your body can circulate oxygen to the tissues that require it -- But there is no transfer -- I mean, we indicate that in "Body By Science" --

C: A lot of people are confused by the words "cardiovascular" and "aerobics" and often intermix them -- You hear them say, "I've gotta get my cardio in so I'm going to go and so an aerobics class" --

J: As if your cardio is not working even when you're at home, on the couch, you know? --

C: Can you explain the definition of 'cardiovascular' and 'aerobics' so that the average layperson can understand it? --

J: Well "aerobics" is just a noun that Ken Cooper created to sell books in the 1960's -- There is an 'aerobic' sub-segment of metabolism, but there is no such thing as "aerobics" -- It doesn't exist -- And yes, you can use your aerobic subsection of metabolism, but to me, that is a section of the totality of metabolism -- So, to just isolate one sub-segment of metabolism is a step in the wrong direction -- It's like someone saying, "I'm just going to work my right hand. I want to give ninety percent of all my attention in martial arts to my right hand" -- Well, what about your left hand and your legs and your knees and your ankles, etc. -- You're just leaving so much out -- And the same is true with people who just focus on one sub-segment of metabolism --

C: People talk about separating these elements --

J: Yeah -- You can do a type of activity that uses ninety percent exclusively your sub-segment of metabolism -- And you can actually do one that does one hundred percent of it, and that's called sleeping -- But if you want really improve your aerobic sub-segment of metabolism and use it, and really drive it so that it gets better or stronger, you have to give it what causes it to cycle faster, your Krebs cycles within the mitochondria to cycle faster, a chemical called "pyruvate" -- And pyruvate is something that is the result of a back-engineering of lactic acid -- And lactic acid is produced by your anaerobic system, [which means] in the absence of oxygen -- So, if you really want to drive your aerobic system, you have to drive your anaerobic system -- So, when you do really intense anaerobic exercise, you produce a mother-lode of lactic acid which your body then has to deal with, has to process it -- And it back-engineers that into pyruvate, and that is the coal of the aerobic furnace -- So, the question then becomes, "How do I get my endurance up, if you will, for a particular activity, whether it is, let's say it's sparring in martial arts -- A guy does a couple of punches and kicks, and he feels like he's climbed a tall building with a car on his back -- He's useless for another round -- Well, the way you get better at it is by doing that event, because your body is an economist at heart -- And your muscular system certainly is-- And it learns how to economize the more often you do it -- It tends to over-mobilize it's forces initially because it doesn't really know what this event is-- But then, as it gets more familiar with it, it says, "Ah, we didn't really need these guys to become involved", or "we didn't really need to use as many of them on this, so we won't put as many of them into it" and eventually your endurance seems to be better --

And what's really happening is your body is just learning what it needs certain muscular involvement, metabolic involvement, and what it doesn't -- And you can witness that yourself -- You probably remember the very first time behind the wheel of a car when you drove a standard (stickshift) -- You probably went five or ten minutes and you were exhausted -- Because every muscle in your body was involved -- You gripped steering wheel tight, you over-pushed down on the clutch, you used your hip muscles a little too aggressively when you applied the accelerator -- All of that stuff, the shifting gears was an effort -- But you did it the next day and the next day, and so on, and six months later you're zipping down a freeway, with one arm out the window, singing a song on the radio, shifting gears effortlessly -- Well, the only thing that happened was your body learned to economize -- It was like, "Whoa, we didn't need to be that tense when we did that" -- You didn't have to go and jog in order to develop better endurance for driving a standard -- And remember, you were exhausted when you finished driving the standard the first time -- It's like that -- And you notice probably the people who are new to your school, the first time they do sparring they're absolutely exhausted --

C: Oh yeah, I can still remember my first day of sparring -- I was just physically trashed at the end of it --

J: Because you over-mobilize -- Your body panics -- It's an adrenalized state, and you're absolutely whipped -- I had a friend who became a boxer many years ago, and his first amateur fight, the fight was over after the first round because he was done, he was exhausted -- And people might say, "Well, he needs to work on his endurance" -- No he didn't -- It was an adrenalized state -- He over-mobilized his forces and he was out of gas -- And the more he did it, you know, as they say in sparring, you've got to relax -- Well, it's very difficult to do it when it's the first time -- But the more you do it, the more your body, which again, is an economist at heart, looks to conserve energy -- "You know, we didn't need that. We were hunting butterflies with a bazooka. Let's throttle back and apply what we need --

C: So it's like the same thing we were talking about, the specificity -- Let's say in two weeks a martial artist is going to be tested for advancement, and they know that the major physical component will be that they have to complete five 3-minute rounds of demonstrating their kicking proficiency against a partner holding focus gloves --

J: The best way to prepare for that is to keep doing five three minute rounds kicking a partner holding focus gloves --

C: Versus one day of that and another day of biking for fifteen minutes --

J: Yes, -- The biking will make him a better bicyclist -- Very specific -- But it won't transfer -- But we think it would, and that would be the case, but it doesn't -- Basically the same process just repeats itself in a different event -- He over-mobilizes initially on the bike -- The next time out a little less is involved, and so on, and that's also why you see people's pulse rates going down when they do that -- And they take that as an indication that their cardio is better -- All that's happened is the body is now having to service a small fraction of the amount of tissue it had to service initially -- So the beats per minute don't have to go up to do that, it goes down --

Strength Training

C: Let's move onto the subject of strength training -- You have, as they say, killed a lot of "sacred cows" when it comes to bodybuilding and strength training --

J: Sacred cows make the best hamburgers... (laughs)

C: In your opinion, what role does strength play in a martial artist's overall capabilities? How does it relate to such things as their speed, endurance, techniques, etc.? --

J: Well I'd say it's number one, as odd as that may sound, because everything you just mentioned comes through the muscular system, even endurance, that comes through the mitochondria, which is in muscle tissue -- So if you lose muscle tissue, you lose endurance, you lose strength, you lose power, you lose speed, because speed is simply the velocity which you can get a mass moving, and that's completely related to strength -- So strength is number one -- I mean, if you lack the strength to get out of a chair you not going to do Tae Kwon Do, because you can't even stand, let alone kick -- So it all comes down to strength, and that's why some of the so-called 'soft' martial arts, I think, while doing something with your limbs, like Tai Chi is, you're at least working against the weight of the limb, as long as that is sufficiently challenging, you'll get stronger -- As soon as it doesn't become challenging you'll stay the same, and then over time what will happen is that the faster twitch fibers will start to deteriorate -- And if you don't do something to correct that, then pretty soon the intermediate twitch fibers will take the place of the fast twitch ones, and it will be a predominantly slow twitch fiber activity until eventually the intermediate ones deteriorate, and so on -- So strength is very important and something you've got to keep up in your lifetime --

C: On the subject of twitch fibers, when we talk about older training methods, the famous Indian wrestler "The Great Gamma" comes to mind -- He supposedly did 4000 body-weight squats per day as part of his training -- After a period of time, if you are continually adding onto an exercise, wouldn't it get to a point where physically, maybe the first two or three thousand don't even have any effect on you?

J: Yes, and that's the problem -- If the intensity is low, the only way you can go on to recruit the other fibers that you need to is by protracting the endurance -- and the problem with that is that the wear-and-tear is huge -- That's a prescription for osteo-arthritis -- And that's why I think proper resistance, at least we know now that proper resistance training is a much better route to, instead of doing four thousand deep knee bends to cycle through and fatigue out all of the various fiber types in the leg, you can do it in ninety seconds, just as effectively, with a fraction of the wear-and tear, and depending on the velocity with which you perform those, with a fraction of the force -- So, the thing is, in martial arts and to a somewhat lesser degree in strength training/bodybuilding, we tend, I think, to pay a little too much homage to the masters of the past, and what they did -- They did it this way, it worked well for him, who are we to argue with that -- We're not Luddite -- We don't believe that all modern insights are bad and that we've got to live off the grid somewhere in order to reap these benefits -- We can apply what we know -- We've done enough studies now, and enough studies have been done to say yes, this does work and this is a benefit --

C: How important is the rest component in an individual's training regimen? --

J: It's the equal of the workout -- Because it's a balance between the catabolic, or the breaking down, or energy out, and the anabolic, which is the building up or the energy in -- You have to have that in balance -- It's like the teeter-totter -- If you're constantly in a catabolic state, then by definition you're just exhausted, literally --

C: As a martial artist grows older, how important do you feel the role of strength plays in their ability to continue training? --

J: Huge -- That's probably the most important thing -- As soon as someone gets weak, that's pretty much when their martial arts training shuts down -- I was reading the other night about some martial art teacher who packed his training at age sixty, and it was mainly because he just didn't feel he could move at that age -- And that's a young age -- There's no reason someone should be packing in their teaching because their mobility is compromised by a lack of strength -- That's easily remedied --

I remember that, I don't want to pick on Tai Chi, but there was a period where I studied it for a little bit, and I was just interested because I liked the application of Yin and Yang -- I always liked that philosophy, and that was sort of based on the Tai Chi, so I studied it and was given a big spiel by the instructor that this was great and healthy, and that Tai Chi people are happy people -- And it wasn't that much later that the guy went in for a hip operation, and was always miserable and bad-mouthing people -- So we like the idea of the easier way -- You know, slow and gentle, and in martial arts we're inculcated with this belief that soft always overcomes hard and all of these things -- But depending on the circumstances it's true, and certainly it's valid -- I still believe the philosophy is very valid -- But, I think if you just go for the soft, without the balance of the hard, then you're going to have problems -- And I think sometimes people rely a little too much on what feels good, and in the Tai Chi case, where there is no hard, really, you could go to problems unless you supplement that with an appropriate amount of Yang --

C: In your books you discuss the point about the wear and tear that can happen over time as a result of repetitive use of the body in any activity, sport, etc., be it running, tennis, martial arts, even walking. -- What about the martial artist who is throwing hundreds of punches or kicks everyday in training? -- Could they be damaging themselves in the long-run?

J: Yeah, big time they could be --And I think that's why strength becomes even more important -- Because strength is a bit of a cushion there -- Instead of it going through, exclusively as you get weaker it might go through, forces may be traveling exclusively through bones and connective tissues, the muscular system serves as a shock absorber -- So that is very helpful -- However, if you're going to be in an activity that the perfection of which requires thousands of repetitions, there is going to be wear and tear, and there's no real way around that -- The only thing you can try and do, I guess, is to build enough of a muscular base that, when that erodes over time, you still have adequate amounts of muscle to protect it -- Although again it is an individual and a genetically determined trait --

C: You are well-known for your contributions to the legacy of the late Bruce Lee -- you were responsible from compiling and editing several books of Lee's written material, including "The Art of Expressing the Human Body" which contains all of Bruce Lee notes, writings, etc. concerning physical training -- You're also a big believer in the potential risks of over-training -- From your point of view, would you say that according to what we now know, that Bruce Lee was in danger of over-training his body? --

J: Yes, I think without question -- Although, having said that, I mean certain things -- Like I would say the running, probably was over-done -- And also, given his back injury, not a good thing -- That probably exasperated it to some degree, when you get his bodyweight, with a multiplier of four coming down per leg -- Probably not a good thing -- His strength training, to me, I think, from what I've seen was done to some degree in moderation -- It was probably more than we would advocate now, like two or three days a week -- But given his schedule, I don't even think he could consistently keep a three-day-a-week weight training schedule that often -- I think when he moved into Hong Kong and got his Marcy circuit trainer, I believe he had the time to use it all that often -- And that was just circumstances -- I think, given Bruce Lee's mindset, he would have done that exactly as he mapped it out and would have over-trained -- But over-training is a process, it's not an event -- So he may have had an inordinate, and must have had an inordinate genetic tolerance or an ability to tolerate that before something negative happened --

C: How was he able to become so strong while maintaining a body-weight of around 130 pounds?

J: I think that was mainly through his technique practice -- He learned how to throw techniques and then how to get his body behind it, which is mechanics -- And I don't know that he studied mechanics -- But intuitively he sensed mechanics -- This is more powerful, this results in a more powerful strike -- We do have some evidence that he did study Isaac Newton and some physics, and the laws of motion -- I think that's significant -- But a lot of stuff too, with most people that really excel in something, is they are so intuitive that way -- You develop an intuition about what works, what makes you more powerful, what makes you faster -- But again, Bruce's thing too was if you want to develop a better kick, kick -- It wasn't if you want a better kick, flip tires or use a sledgehammer on a tire -- It was "skill specific" -- And we have ample anecdotal evidence that he would practice, practice, practice until he could do a technique better than the person that showed it to him -- And that's skill training -- And that's okay -- You can do that as often as you want -- Now mind you, everything that we've said, I don't know that I would want to have Bruce Lee's joints at age seventy -- I mean, Bruce at seventy might have been in rough shape -- You know, because of all the training he did --- But at 32, he was probably over-trained, yeah, but the crows hadn't come home to roost at that point --

Exercise vs. Activity

C: In your opinion, would consider martial art to be more of a physical activity or a recreational activity as opposed to exercise?

J: Yeah, I would, because we differentiate between physical conditioning and, you could say, recreational activity -- Martial art to me, it's an 'art' -- Well, it should be -- I mean, if you're going to practice it diligently, it's an art, because you're not getting into a streetfight every week,

right? -- Because, sort of what comes with martial art is an understanding that this is serious, it's violent, and that someone's going to get hurt, and it could be you -- So if you're going to take lessons and you're going to invest your time and energy in to learning an 'art,' it is the 'art' you're learning, and that puts it in a different category -- It's a complex art -- Some arts are more complex than others -- But just like glass-blowing is a complex art -- More so than perhaps painting -- Music is a complex art, writing is a complex art, filmmaking is a complex art -- But they're arts, and you know, they require hundreds, if not tens of thousands of hours in order to achieve mastery of these various arts -- Any conditioning element you get out of martial arts, you can get far more efficiently out of proper resistance training, and that includes flexibility -- So, as far as matching it up as an exercise, against proper resistance training, I think everything else is pretty much a distant second -- There's a lot of negative elements in martial arts training per se, that aren't good, long term -- I mean, think about how many martial artists you know with knee and hip replacements --

C: Yeah, I've known several personally...

J: They do a lot of stuff that is not congruent with muscle and joint function, it goes against the grain of it -- And if you do that enough you're gonna have a problem -- But yeah, so it is an art, and it falls into the category of skill training as opposed to conditioning training -- You get better at that skill by practicing that skill --

C: When it comes to martial arts, are a lot of people mistaking skill conditioning for physical conditioning?

J: Yeah, and that's not to say that someone wouldn't come back and say, "Are you kidding? I'm drenched in sweat after a martial arts class, and my muscles are sore the next day..." -- And all those things are true -- But I remember Ken Hutchins, the guy who created Superslow™ said, "You know, you've got to look at the criteria there..." -- He said that he was a professional trumpet player, and he said when he played trumpet he was exhausted afterward, he was covered in sweat, he was sore the next day, but that didn't mean he was exercising -- But we associate certain metabolic effects that come from certain physical activities as being exercise, and they're not -- I mean, exercise has to be a balance between the breaking down, or the catabolic, and the building up, or anabolic -- Well, actually that's more a definition of "health" now that I think about it -- But there has to be a certain threshold effect of energy that results in a positive adaptation of your physiology -- And that doesn't always happen with martial arts -- You can get better at the skills, and you can do the skill with less effort, in the same way that the first time you drove a standard stickshift car you were exhausted, whereas months later the practice of it didn't take anything out of you at all -- But it's not exercise.

C: According to this, would martial art be classified as more of a slow-twitch or intermediate twitch fiber activity versus high intensity or fast-twitch fiber activity?

J: Yeah, that's not to say there's not fast-twitch fibers involved, especially in something like grappling I think you'd have multiple fibers involved -- Because you'd quickly tire out... I can speak from when used to wrestle... you'd quickly tire out the slow-twitch and the intermediate, and you've got nothing left but the fast-twitch at this point, and it's very demanding --

But I'd say it's dissipated quite a bit, not any one muscle group is inroaded or weakened to the point where there has been an adaptation which makes that one muscle group stronger, it's spread out amongst all various muscle groups until the weakest link in that chain fatigues out and then usually it's over, right? -- So it's physical, but it's not physical conditioning that necessarily results in a positive adaptation -- If exercise doesn't produce or stimulate the body to produce a positive adaptation, it can't qualify as exercise -- It's a demonstration of existing physical capabilities --

C: While I know that obviously there is a certain amount of physicality involved in martial art, would it be correct to say that it is really more about the neural training?

J: Yeah, correct -- It's how to do the techniques correctly, how to move -- When you look at it.. I remember when I was studying with Ted (Wong), I'd look at certain things like technique and footwork and think, "Oh that's a piece of cake..." -- And then I'd do it and realize, "No it isn't. I completely screwed that up, that wasn't right" -- And that just comes with practice -- But it didn't result in a positive adaptation of my cardiovascular system -- The drills didn't make me more flexible, didn't increase my muscle strength or muscle size -- So it wasn't a stimulus that rose to the level of being exercise, resulting in the body producing a positive physical adaptation -- It was an inordinate output of energy initially -- It was an over-mobilization of involved muscles that were brought into play -- And the more I practiced, the better I got at not involving certain muscles and draining certain energy supplies that didn't need to be involved, so it didn't take as much out of me -- And I learned how to economize if you will, with my energy, like all martial artists do -- You know, when you're starting out in any martial art, more of the traditional martial arts like Karate or things like that, they'll have you routinely hold a horse-stance for 10-20 minutes, and your thighs are just burning at that point -- That, to the untrained, can represent an exercise, because your body will make an adaptation -- But after, it economizes and pretty soon you can hold that for 10-20 minutes and you're not feeling anything -- It ceases to be an exercise at that point --

C: When I'm explaining this to my students and classes, I use the analogy of working a side kick against a kicking shield -- The beginner, after one minute of kicking and throwing maybe ten kicks, is exhausted, breathing hard -- They're like, "What the hell is happening?" -- But a couple of months down the road they're hitting the shield for three, four, five minutes with a high level of intensity and he's not tired -- And they turn around and say, "See how much my endurance has improved." --

J: Yeah... (laughs) ... that's not what's happening -- They're using less energy to do the same thing -- Same thing when you run -- First time you run you're exhausted, sore, and everything else -- And then you do it and your body quickly makes the calculation, then, "Whoa, we threw way too much into that activity the first time we did it. We only needed a quarter of that" -- So pretty soon it only throws a quarter of it at it, and the individual notices that his heart's not beating as hard, pulse rates down, and they think there's been a huge adaptation -- Well, there hasn't -- It's just the body has throttled back on what it's thrown into the activity because it's recognized it didn't need to throw that much in --

C: The face of fitness is changing, albeit slowly -- It seems to me that in the same way the Bruce Lee thumbed his nose at tradition and “hacked away the non-essentials” when it came to martial art, you have done the same thing with regards to strength and fitness training -- Getting it down to exactly what is necessary, and again, achieving the maximum with the minimum --

J: Well it's a flattering compliment -- But I think, truthfully, like you, I grew up very influenced by that philosophy of Bruce's and trying to find the essentials -- And if it wasn't essential, then it couldn't be that important, by definition, and then it's a question of rather than seeing how much we can tolerate in terms of exercise, let's rather see how little is precisely required -- And a lot of people have trouble with that nexus, but the thing is why would you spend one second more on something than you need to? That to me is just a waste of your time, and as Bruce also said, “If you love life, don't waste time for time is what life is made up of” --

C: Thanks again for taking the time to chat.

J: You're welcome.



John Little

John Little is considered one of the world's foremost authorities on the life and work of Bruce Lee, his training methods, and his philosophy. John has been the only person authorized by the Bruce Lee estate to review and use the entirety of Lee's personal notes, sketches, and reading annotations. He edited a five-volume series of books on Lee's material. In addition, John served as the associate publisher of Bruce Lee magazine, the managing editor of Knowing Is Not Enough, the official newsletter of the JFJKD Nucleus, and as a director of the non-profit Bruce Lee Foundation.

In the world of strength and fitness training, John Little would certainly be considered an iconoclast. Recognized as "one of the top fitness researchers in North America", John has exposed and laid to rest many of the myths, lies and fallacies that surround the world of bodybuilding and fitness training. Utilizing scientific principles instead of following tradition and dogma, he is the innovator of three revolutionary training protocols, including Max Contraction Training. A prolific writer, John has authored 12 books on exercise and 38 books on philosophy, history, and martial arts. In addition his numerous articles have been published in every fitness and martial art magazine in North America.



Chris Kent

With over 40 years experience, Chris Kent is widely acknowledged as one of the world's foremost authorities on Jeet Kune Do, and has gained international recognition for his knowledge and leadership in perpetuating the art, training methods, and philosophy developed by the legendary Bruce Lee. As a teacher, professional consultant, and speaker, Chris has traveled the world, teaching and sharing the benefit of his expertise in the art and philosophy of Jeet Kune Do with thousands of people.

Chris has authored 3 of the highest rated books on Jeet Kune Do: *The Encyclopedia of Jeet Kune Do*, *Jeet Kune Do - The Textbook*, and *Jeet Kune Do Kickboxing*. In addition he has both written for and appeared in countless martial art publications both nationally and internationally including *Inside Kung Fu*, *Black Belt*, *Martial Art Masters*, *Budo International*, *Combat* and *Martial Arts Illustrated*. He has also written and produced 3 series of training videotapes and DVDs which remain the standard of the industry. His latest book, "LIBERATE YOURSELF! - A Guide to Personal Freedom" and "P.L.A.N. - Personal Liberation Action Notebook" detail how individuals can apply the philosophical tenets of self-actualization utilized by Bruce Lee to their own lives.

Chris was a one of the co-founders of "The Bruce Lee Educational Foundation", a non-profit, organization created for the purpose of perpetuating Bruce Lee's art and philosophy for future generations, and for 5 years served as a member of the Board of Directors.